

BRAHMANISM ABROAD: ON CARIBBEAN HINDUISM AS AN ETHNIC RELIGION

Peter van der Veer
University of Pennsylvania

Steven Vertovec
University of Oxford

Outside of India, Hinduism plays a central role in organizing and orienting communities of Indian migrants and their descendants. Since Indians have migrated to all parts of the world, Hinduism has become unambiguously a distinct world religion. It is therefore important that the study of Hinduism does not remain confined to the Indian subcontinent. In this essay, we consider the development of Hinduism in the Caribbean context and specifically in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad. Our discussion of Caribbean Hinduism is predicated on the assumption that to be a Hindu is neither an unchanging, primordial identity nor an infinitely flexible one which one can adopt or shed at will, depending on circumstances. It is an identity acquired through social practice and, as such, constantly negotiated in changing contexts.

Our argument is that the evolution of Caribbean Hinduism can be interpreted as an ethnicization of religion under Brahman leadership. In Caribbean Hinduism differences in social and religious practice have been underplayed in the course of a long-term historical process in which a homogeneous Hindu community has been constructed.

Within the Caribbean states of Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, Hindus traditionally regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as a distinct ethnic group marked not only by names and religious beliefs, but by criteria of language, kinship, values and aspirations, and social status. In the past, Brahmans have played a major role in consolidating and formulating important symbolic, ideological, and organizational features of Hindu ethnicity in each of the countries concerned. Such features have not only had consequences for ethnic relations and the practice of Hinduism in the Caribbean, they may be seen to carry theoretical relevance to the study of Hinduism in India and to broader studies of religion and social change.

INDIANS IN THE CARIBBEAN

Following the abolition of slavery in British territories between 1834-1838, colonial sugar planters desperately sought new sources of cheap, controllable labor. A migration scheme which brought laborers from India to Mauritius commenced in 1834, and planters in the Caribbean eventually followed suit. British Guiana (today's Guyana) received its first Indian immigrants in 1838, Trinidad in 1845, and Dutch Guiana (Suriname), later in 1873; in the meantime, several other West

Indian territories received Indian workers as well (Table 1). In all places, Indian immigration was conducted under a system of indenture whereby, in most cases, laborers were recruited from vast areas throughout North and South India; induced to enter into contracts to work for at least five years on a foreign plantation (receiving a basic pay); provided housing, rations, and medical attention; and given some assurance of fully- or partly-paid return passage to India (see, *inter alia*, Tinker 1974; Mangru 1987). This system of migration, which obtained for several foreign colonies (including Natal and Fiji) ended in 1917, by which time over 2,500,000 Indians ventured abroad as indentured laborers; perhaps less than a quarter of whom returned to India (see Clarke, Peach and Vertovec 1990).

Table 1
Indian Indentured Immigration to the Caribbean and Indian
Population by Country, 1980

Colony/Country	Period	Indian Immigrants	Estimated Indian Population	Indians as Per Cent of Total Population 1980
British Guiana (Guyana)	1838-1917	238,909	424,400	50.8
Trinidad	1845-1917	143,939	421,000	40.7
Guadelupe	1854-1885	42,326	23,165	1.0
Jamaica	1854-1885	36,420	50,300	1.7
Dutch Guiana (Suriname)	1873-1916	34,000	124,900	31.0
Martinique	1854-1889	25,509	16,450	1.9
St. Lucia	1858-1895	4,350	3,700	3.0
Grenada	1865-1885	3,200	3,900	4.2
St. Vincent	1861-1880	2,472	5,000	5.5

Sources: Roberts and Byrne 1966; Tinker 1974; Singaravelou 1975, 1990; Barret 1982.

The backgrounds of Indian immigrants to the Caribbean were very diverse. In the early years of indentured migration to Trinidad and Guyana, and throughout the period of immigration to the French territories of Guadelupe and Martinique, indentured workers were drawn from throughout Tamil and Telugu-speaking South India. Yet by far the bulk of immigrants who came to the British and Dutch West Indies originated in Northeastern India, especially Bihar and what is now Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Even in these areas, considerable linguistic, economic and ecological, cultural, and religious differences characterized the backgrounds of indentured recruits. Geographically based differences were compounded by social differences, as the indigenous recruiters used by foreign plantation owners travelled far and wide promising easy work and wealth abroad to individuals of any caste or class. Devastating famines, the restructuring of revenue and land tenure systems, the collapse of the textile industry, mass unemployment, and other economic crises which plagued Northeastern India during the latter half of the nineteenth century provided significant push factors affecting the decisions of Indians of all backgrounds to enter upon contracts of indentured labor abroad (Mangru 1987; Vertovec n.d.). Table 2 uses the rather artificial categories

employed by contemporary British colonial authorities and shows a spread of caste backgrounds among North Indian immigrants to the Caribbean which is not dissimilar to the spread characterizing the region of origin as a whole.

Table 2

Religions and Caste Groups of Indentured Indian Migrants to Suriname, Trinidad, British Guiana, 1874-1917, by Per Cent

	Suriname	Trinidad	British Guiana
Brahmans, High Caste	15.7	14.3	11.7
Agriculturalists	30.2	30.0	31.4
Artisans	7.0	6.6	7.5
Low Caste	31.4	34.9	33.8
Total Hindus	84.3	85.8	84.4
Muslims	15.3	13.9	15.1
Christians	--	0.1	0.1
Total	99.6	99.8	99.6

Source: Annual Reports, Protector of Emigrants, Calcutta.

Note: No migration to Suriname recorded in 1874-1875, 1875-1876, 1885, 1887, 1897, 1900, 1903, 1910, 1911, 1915, or 1917.

Once on the plantation estate in the Caribbean, the amalgam of Indian immigrants (the great majority of whom came as individuals, rather than as part of family or caste groups), drawn by the necessity of their diverse backgrounds, set about inadvertently and purposefully to standardize and homogenize religious and cultural practices (Vertovec 1989, n.d.1). This general process was facilitated in each context by the creation of creolized "plantation Hindi" (based largely on Bhojpuri and, especially in the Surinamese Sarnami language, Avadhi dialects). The European-dominated work routines and power structures on colonial plantations radically affected social relations and cultural practices among the indentured population, such that new or wholly modified forms evolved. These included shifts in kinship structures, domestic cycles, roles of women, patronage systems, family alliances and other social networks, economic rationales, leisure activities, and importantly, the introduction of ethnic and race relations with African, Amerind, Chinese, Javanese (in the case of Suriname), and a variety of European peoples. Hinduism and caste, discussed below, represented two of the most far-reaching domains of change.

After five years of indentured labor, an Indian held various options including re-indenturing his or herself for an additional five years to gain free or subsidized return passage to India, working as a paid laborer on the plantation estate, or acquiring land through various means to create a livelihood as a peasant farmer. Free Indians therefore remained primarily rural dwellers engaged in agriculture in practically all the Caribbean territories. Especially after the Second World War,

many settled within proximity of urban areas in the larger territories (Georgetown in Guyana, San Fernando and Port of Spain in Trinidad, Paramaribo in Suriname). Since the same period, Indians became more involved collectively in national politics in these three countries, serving until recently in each case as the core of major opposition parties.

Currently Hindus constitute 34 per cent of the total population of Guyana (754,000 - 1980), 25 per cent of Trinidad (1,016,232 - 1980), and 25 per cent of Suriname (405,000 - 1986). (These figures are not completely reliable, since they are affected by large-scale, unrecorded immigration to Europe, Canada, and the United States.) Throughout their history in the Caribbean, Indians have utilized Hindu tenets, practices, networks, and organizations to consolidate themselves into a politically motivated community. Yet, far from constituting a static system of reference, these Hindu phenomena have themselves been subject to significant change.

HINDUISM OUTSIDE INDIA

Hindu beliefs and ritual behavior have long been interpreted as the ideology and practice of Indian society. In general anthropological theory, India has become the locus of caste and hierarchy. Such concepts become hegemonic in a discipline, since they provide a shorthand way of summarizing cultural complexities as well as a link between ethnographic reality and theoretical preoccupations (Appadurai 1986, 1988). While these concepts are related to places and tend to confine culture to its locality, they are not directly derived from fieldwork, but have a complex origin in anthropological theory. While native culture is confined to its locale, anthropological discourse is metropolitan and derives its inspiration from all places.

What makes the case of overseas Hinduism of such importance for the anthropology of Hinduism is exactly that it clearly shows that native culture is not at all confined to one locality, since the natives live all over the world. It thus provides an excellent critique of the sociological determinism which confines Hinduism to the caste society of India. Hinduism is clearly not local in the sense that it is inseparably linked to only one geographical area and one reified social structure although, as with every religion, it is practiced and understood in particular places and at particular moments. Its study has therefore to be contextualized. Differences in the ways in which Hinduism has been elaborated in local contexts exist as much between India and Fiji as between Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Certainly, nobody would think of arguing that Christians cease to be Christians when they leave Europe. Similarly, it would be ridiculous to say that the Hinduism of Punjabis in Britain or of Gujaratis in East Africa is not relevant to the anthropological discussion of Hinduism.

The social construction of religious and, for that matter, ethnic identities depends to a great extent on historical context. The authority of certain ideas and practices does not depend on what we, as outsiders, define as their transhistorical essence, but on the outcome of internal cultural processes in localized arenas. This does not imply that religion is simply a black box into which everything can be put according to the interests of the principal actors in a certain socio-political domain. Religion is not an infinitely plastic resource for pursuing communal interests. What we argue is that to understand why some religious ideas and practices become authoritative, while others are rejected or stigmatized as inferior or wrong, we

have to contextualize religious identity by way of examining the creation of religious ideology and organization *vis-à-vis* broader, encompassing social configurations and cultural terrains.

On one hand, Hindu identity changes when its context changes, since new generations are inculcated and habituated with successively modified, largely nonconscious rules for behavior, dispositions, motivations, aesthetics: in short, with culture as derived from social practice (cf. Bentley 1987). On the other hand, Hindu identity conditions the ways in which these new contexts are understood. Contextual shifts tend to stimulate processes through which the normally nonconscious, taken-for-granted components of culture are consciously reflected upon. Such self-reflection, often the harbinger to the formation of a specific ideology (Kapferer 1983: 19), entails a collective assessment of the nature of the change, together with its consequences for the group's place, role, and future in their given social milieu.

Finally, it is important to see that religious identities depend on ideologies which tend to deny change and history. The message of much Hindu belief and practice is that Hinduism is eternal and unchanging. It is the message of the Sanatan Dharm itself. Caribbean Hinduism is thus a form of the religion which not only provides a meaningful, though malleable, identity for a minority community in an evolving context of ethnic pluralism, it is a form which, though altered in many basic ways (evident to Caribbean Hindus themselves), nonetheless denies history (Kelly 1988).

Hinduism in India is characterized by a great plurality of beliefs and practices which vary by historical period, location, and social group. These include variations in the ritual role of castes, deities propitiated, sacred sites, and the influence of Islam and numerous Hindu sects. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when indentured migration was under way, such variety pertained to the vast Gangetic plain whence migrants were drawn. Yet in virtually all foreign colonies where North Indian laborers settled, differences in Hindu belief and practice were homogenized into a general corpus. In most overseas contexts, the religion has been marked by patterns of change which "led from village and caste beliefs and practices to wider, more universalistic definitions of Hinduism that cut across local and caste differences" (Jayawardena 1968:444). For example, Bharati (1970:39) notes that "the Hindu settlers in East Africa have achieved a complete fusion of 'big' and 'little' tradition elements." Kuper (1957:227) has described a similar process in South Africa, through which the religion has taken its own equivalent form of a regional Hinduism in India by means of becoming "socially as well as dogmatically inclusive" (Kuper 1960:216). Likewise, Benedict (1961:141) observes:

Hinduism is noted for the variety which it encompasses. There are different sites and different forms of deities not only for various linguistic groups but for different castes within the same linguistic or geographic category. In Mauritius this diversity is steadily giving way to uniformity.

In the Caribbean, too, a Hinduism emerged which was unitary and capable of being followed by Hindus originally drawn from a variety of geographically, linguistically, and caste differentiated traditions. Some of the important lowest common denominators which brought Hindus together in the Caribbean were recognition of a limited pantheon of sanskritic deities (including Vishnu and his major incarnations as Rama and Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Lakshmi, Ganesha, and Hanuman), an emphasis on Vaishnava devotionalism (*bhakti*) in ways significantly

influenced by North Indian monastic orders such as Ramanandis, the wide popularity of Tulsidas' Ramayana, and a general acceptance of the ritual authority of Brahmans. For the Indian immigrants, arriving at common religious beliefs and practices represented the first step in the development of Hinduism as an ethnic religion in the Caribbean.

There were three subsequent and related developments in the evolution of Hinduism and Hindu society in the Caribbean. First, the context of ethnic, racial, and religious pluralism (coupled with sustained conversion efforts by Christian missionaries) in each Caribbean territory effected a kind of self-consciousness about beliefs and practices heretofore unexperienced in the subcontinent. This was exacerbated by the fact that Hindus, deemed heathen and idolatrous, and holding low position in society as indentured and plantation-dependent coolies, were disdained by members of virtually every other segment of colonial Caribbean society (Brereton 1979). Among priests and laymen alike, the outcome of pluralism and contextual self-consciousness included knowledge and first-hand observation of non-South Asian religions (especially Catholicism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, and various Afro-Caribbean traditions), greater call for self-rationalization and legitimation regarding the choice and performance of rites and other practices, and the sharpening of apologetics regarding beliefs and doctrines.

Second, as unitary forms of Hinduism emerged and as Hindus grew more aware of their isolation as members of a minority religion, congregational modes of worship increasingly came to the fore. This coincided with the founding of numerous temples when Indians completed their terms of indenture, left the estates, and began settling in near homogeneously Indian villages. Congregational worship, in the form of periodic large scale celebrations, regular *puja* (rites of offering to various deities) and gatherings to recite the Ramayana or to sing devotional hymns, forged communal links and settlements in fundamental and especially powerful ways.

The third development was critical to the evolution of a Hindu ethnic community, having pervasively affected several key features of Indian society and culture overseas. This was the attenuation of the caste system and virtually all it entailed, including the salience of corporately ranked identities, ascribed ritual duties, political and economic power relations, and proscriptions and prescriptions on individual behavior, social interaction, and types of exchange. A good deal of anthropological attention has been given to this subject (e.g., Schwartz 1967), and most of the literature underscores the fact that caste no longer plays any significant social, political, or economic role in contexts where indentured immigration obtained. This is largely because the indentured migrants were transplanted predominantly as individuals drawn from a vast range of origins in India, where there were significantly different demographics, roles, networks, attributes, categories, and views surrounding caste. In the new environment overseas, corporate caste groups could not form because it was impossible to arrive at commonalities regarding all of the above mentioned features found among caste groups in subcontinental locations. Thus some common attributions were made by way of reference to the "all-India" framework of *varna* (Speckmann 1965:105-108), but this proved too broad to serve as a basis for effective corporate identity or action. During shipment overseas and on the estates, co-residency and commensality of persons from different caste backgrounds led to patterns of interaction on which purity regulations were of little concern. Traditional

divisions of labor were replaced by the plantation work regimes. Caste endogamy was difficult to uphold due to extremely uneven sex ratios, and only on the level of *varna* was it sometimes maintained in any regular fashion (Clarke 1967). By far most of the names and characteristics associated with *jati* (and certainly of other categories such as *biraderi* and *gotra*) quickly faded from memory, or became generalized, little referred-to terms of origin. Awareness of caste background came to play, at best, a minor role in accentuating status or marking a vague notion of difference (cf. Pocock 1957).

These trends were manifested in Trinidad, where Klass (1961:62) observed that "any sense of caste solidarity or group interests is almost entirely lacking" and where Clarke (1967:169) points out, "The castes have no myths, heroes, or heritage of their own. In fact there has been a 'generalization' of Indian culture which has effaced the cultural variations which were associated with caste in India." Similarly, although Niehoff (1960) found a vague hierarchy of caste identities, he (1967:162) ultimately concluded that "in Trinidad, the matter of caste status is of so little importance in comparison with other status markers that some Hindus have forgotten what caste they belong to."

An aspect ignored in this literature on the disappearance of caste in the overseas context, is the extent to which the Hindu caste system has been a construction of the colonial state in India. The British collected massive amounts of documentation in their efforts to classify, categorize, and "settle" the vast social world that was India. It is especially Bernhard Cohn's writings which have shown the extent to which colonial projects, such as the Census operations, created the social categories of caste in an effort to order India for administrative purposes (Cohn 1987). Caste as a category was clearly not a necessary category for the control of indentured labor in the plantation system. The absence of state policies that emphasized caste has been an important factor in the early establishment of a unified Hindu community.

Thus Caribbean Hinduism presents a case which contradicts much of the influential theory on Hinduism that is preoccupied with caste. Weber wrote "Before everything else, without caste there is no Hindu" (in: Gerth and Mills 1946:396). Similarly, Srinivas (1956:495) states that "Hinduism lacks all organization, excluding the caste system. If and when caste disappears, Hinduism will also disappear." A highly influential formulation of this position is that of Dumont (1970:16), who argues that "the Hindu belief in gods is secondary and derived in relation to the fundamental religious values of caste" and that "all that appears to be social is in fact religious and all that appears religious is in fact social." Yet in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname, a caste system has always been absent while Hinduism has remained vibrant. What is the nature of Hinduism in overseas contexts like this, given the absence of the social system long presumed as necessary to its existence? Obviously, we have to give caste a much more limited place in our analysis of the ways in which Hindu discourses and practices are socially organized. This leads us to a reconsideration of the position of the Brahman priest and of Brahmanical Hinduism in the light of Caribbean evidence.

THE POSITION OF THE BRAHMAN PRIEST

While we have underscored the development of a unitary form of Hinduism, largely facilitated by the removal of caste divisions within the immigrant Indian

population in the Caribbean, it must be acknowledged that some, now quite peripheral, forms of Hinduism still exist in the region (Vertovec n.d.1). These include practices undertaken by sects such as Kabir *panthis*, Swaminarayanis, Arya Samajis, and Aghoris, along with non-Brahmanic rites directed toward harnessing and praising *shakti* (cosmic power associated with the Divine Mother), especially those surrounding South-Indian-derived Kali Mai *puja* in Guyana (Bassier 1987). Yet the important feature to bear in mind here concerns what amounts to a kind of hegemony by the mainstream, Brahman-dominated Sanatanist tradition in the Caribbean. Even though minor Hindu traditions persist, participants in these still recognize and also participate in the more orthodox beliefs and practices of Sanatanists. Much of this dual recognition and affiliation comes from patterns long predominant in India itself, where members of low caste or local traditions revere and engage in features of the encompassing, Brahmanic Hindu "Great tradition." Part and parcel of this, in turn, involves the recognition of the Brahman elite as the carriers of this broader, ancient, and textually legitimated tradition. In the Caribbean, where generally little value is attached to the caste identities of the bulk of the Hindu population, Brahmans (who soon after immigrating came to disregard their myriad premigration subdivisions) have steadfastly maintained their status as ritual elite.

Throughout Trinidad and British and Dutch Guyana, the Brahmans' influence was evident from the start. Even while migrant numbers were comparatively small, one English missionary remarked, "No wonder that the idolatrous and superstitious practices of the countries from which they came are being introduced. There are a few Gurus and Brahmans among the Coolies" (Underhill 1862:52). Their impact was profound among the Hindu immigrants and disdained by the white colonists in each Caribbean context.

By the mid-1870s... numbers of Brahmans began to appear in British Guiana, largely as a result of the bad harvests prevalent in India during that period. The Brahmans performed an important function in Guiana. They made possible the transmutation of Hinduism from the level of a village polytheistic religion to the more Brahminised version... Equally the Brahmans preserved their authority in what was a revolutionary social situation - and a process of consolidation took place.

The new role of the Brahmans was sourly attested by the clergy who attempted to convert the East Indians. They were often referred to as soi-disant Brahmans and imposters, on the dubious assumption that the genuine Brahmans would hardly cross the "black water" and so lose their caste. Yet these "soi-disant" Brahmans were accused of battenning on the Indians and poisoning their minds against Christianity; and their effectiveness proved their authority (Moore 1970:355-356).

On the plantation estates, laborers of Brahman and other high caste origins were reluctant to work under drivers of low caste origins who had been promoted from the coolie ranks (Comins 1893:79). Because they were recalcitrant regarding their own status, Brahmans were widely regarded by planters as troublemakers and potential revolutionaries, so colonial administrators sought to restrict their immigration (Mangru 1987:182-183). Eventually, though, "Managers often found it more advisable for estate discipline to give Brahmans light work on the estate in an attempt to enlist their support of the social system" (Moore 1970:356).

Most Brahman priests who had completed their contracts of indenture stayed in the respective colonies, where they often wandered from estate to estate and settlement to settlement. Local Hindu communities would raise funds of up to \$100 to sponsor rites performed by the pundits (Bronkhurst 1883:292). In every

locale, the immigrants would "find great pleasure in coming together and listening to the tales or sacred books" propounded by the Brahman priests (Comins 1893:80).

The process of homogenization and standardization of belief and practice was doubtless not a smooth one. At first, priests from different devotional or sectarian backgrounds probably did not wish to dilute their specific traditions or approaches; instead, a situation existed where "each [was] strenuously contending for the supremacy of the chief object of their worship, and the consequent inferiority of the other" (Bronkhurst 1888:17). Notwithstanding the efforts of travelling pundits and sadhus, Hindu practice probably differed somewhat from settlement to settlement, since "each priest had his own disciples" (Morton 1916:52). First, many Brahman priests were most likely reluctant to perform rites for low caste clients (cf. Speckmann 1965:33); this would soon change in the Caribbean, for the same reasons Jayawardena (1971:94) pointed out in Fiji:

Most Brahmin priests gradually relaxed their attitude to lower castes. The few who were more tolerant came to be in great demand, becoming famous priests whose reputations eclipsed those of the more orthodox. ...Because faith in a Brahmin's charismatic power was often a function of his popularity, the more liberal priest tended to displace the more conservative.

Thus certain Brahman priests came to draw wider clientele and acquire considerable reputations by proselytizing beliefs and practices of a lowest common denominator, yet ones with attraction and prestige (Jayawardena 1966:227-229).

Eventually, the Brahman priest took on functions much like that of a Christian parish priest; visiting homes, providing religious instruction, settling disputes, and so on (Jayawardena 1968:228; Schwartz 1965). But, by far, they came to emphasize ritual aspects of Hinduism at the expense of spiritual, devotional, and ascetic ones. Through their monopoly on ritual knowledge and guarded access to ritual texts, Brahmans multiplied their functions to serve simultaneously as teachers and spiritual guides (*gurus*), family priests (*kul-purohits*), temple priests (*pujari*), ritual specialist (*karmakandin*), funeral priests (*mahapatra*), astrologers, healers, exorcists, and even practitioners of black magic (*ojha*). This process of gaining multiple roles was facilitated by, and led to the ultimate instances of, the removal of internal differentiation within the Brahman category. Since plantation days, Brahmans in the Caribbean have continued to protect their position by (*varna*) endogamy as well as by insisting upon their own right-through-birth to fulfill all of these specialist roles.

Apart from their quite successful attempt to attain a monopoly of Hinduism, however, the Caribbean pundits do not differ much from, say, pilgrimage priests in North India. Both compete freely and vehemently amongst each other, both have a rapacious reputation among the population at large, and both are hardly interested in the social and moral consequences of being involved in what they and others see as low (*niche*) practices. Rather, they see the economic rewards of their profession as important. Their self-esteem and social prestige are more often than not based upon material rather than immaterial considerations (van der Veer 1985).

Hindus may not need caste, but even in the case of the West Indies they seem to need Brahmans as their religious specialists. Why is that so? Brahmans are often portrayed as the bearers of a higher Sanskrit tradition that constitutes the "unity of India" (Dumont 1970:4). The disadvantage of such a view is that it tends to essentialize Sanskrit civilization. We argue that in many, if not most, social contexts Brahmans, as repositories of sacred knowledge, are given a position of

authority to decide what Hinduism really is. Part of the authorizing process is the claim that there is an unalterable scriptural source for what is actually authorized and that only Brahmans are in the position to know that source and its interpretation. In fact, this does not form an obstacle for religious innovation. As Brockington (1981:192) has argued for the Indian case, "Brahmans have maintained their position as guardians and transmitters of the religious tradition only by being receptive, albeit often, reluctantly, to any innovations which receive a real popular following."

Brahman priests in the Caribbean have achieved an even more central position in Hinduism than is the case in India. They could establish without much challenge what was authoritative and what was not. Although the need for Brahman priests has been challenged in the past and is continuously debated in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname, Indo-Caribbean Brahmans have been able to monopolize ritual activities to an unprecedented extent since the days of indentured migration. The Caribbean case makes it clear that scholarly attention should be given to the role of Brahmans as innovating agents in changing social configurations. The Brahmanical religion of the Caribbean is not simply a system of meaning inherited from India, but a dynamic set of relations between religious knowledge, roles, and organizations.

BRAHMANIZATION AND HINDU ORGANIZATION

The process through which Brahmans and Brahmanic ideas have come to have exclusive dominance over ritual activity in the Caribbean can be called Brahmanization (Singaravelou 1987 [III]:133-135). A necessary consequence of this process was the marginalization of low caste religious activities. Jayawardena (1966) described this dual process for Guyana and his findings have been corroborated by our recent research concerning Suriname (van der Burg and van der Veer 1986) and Trinidad (Vertovec n.d.2).

In Indian Hinduism informants often make a distinction between ritual practices in which Brahman priests are involved and those in which low caste specialists perform. The latter are often primarily concerned with illness, spirit possession, and the propitiation of mother goddesses by animal sacrifice, while the former are often primarily concerned with devotional worship of what Srinivas has termed *sanskritic* deities. To describe this, Mandelbaum (1966) has developed a model of Indian Hinduism in which a transcendent complex of universal gods, Sanskrit texts and rituals dominated by priests of Brahman castes, is differentiated from a pragmatic complex of local gods and traditions dominated by low-caste priests. Since both members of Brahman and of low castes migrated to the Caribbean, one would expect this traditional pattern to have been reinstated, but the opposite happened. The low caste specialists were gradually marginalized from the religious arenas while their practices, such as propitiation of the Goddess Bhawani or *Dih*, became peripheral (Vertovec n.d.1). Brahman priests, however, established their dominance over certain domains which had been formerly the stronghold of low caste specialists. This is especially clear in the field of pragmatic or instrumental rituals that focus on the cure of illness, evil eye, sorcery, and possession by spirits. Brahman priests claim to have superior knowledge in this lucrative domain, though in general they try to downplay their dealings with the powers of darkness. Caribbean Hindus continue to make a hierarchical distinction between the

devotional worship of transcendent, Sanskritic deities and the pragmatic treatment of affliction by demons and the like. This distinction, however, does not anymore result in the division of labor between Brahman and non-Brahman priests, but only in a differentiation between front stage and back stage activities (van der Veer n.d.1).

Perhaps foremost in the process of Brahmanization was the gradual adoption by virtually all Hindus of a single repertoire of Brahmanic rites for all ritual occasions (Vertovec n.d.1). These Brahman-dominated practices, which have become routine features in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, include the performance of formal *puja* (involving Sanskritic formulae governing sixteen offerings, or *shodasopachara*, made to various deities), *kathas* (routinized recitations of sacred lore, particularly a text devoted to Satyanarayan), weddings (though only the climactic formal rites were overseen by Brahmans), funerals (involving a host of ceremonies over a period of at least ten days), and *bhagwats* or *yagnas* (elaborate activities over the course of seven to fourteen days centered on the recitation of a sacred text and including the singing of *bhajans*, sermons and speeches, and nightly communal feasts). These have continued through the present, though sometimes in locally modified or embellished forms (Vertovec 1990). While Caribbean Hindus acknowledge that changes have been made, that distinguish their ritual styles from those in the subcontinent, the sheer presence of a Brahman in any of the proceedings usually provides significant and authoritative legitimation for the locally evolved traditions (van der Veer n.d.2).

In Trinidad, a Sanatan Dharma Association was founded in 1881, though the nature of its functions or activities is not clearly known. By the 1920s, small local groups propounding the emergent "orthodox" Brahmanical Hinduism were active in the island, including the Prabarthak Sabha of Debe and the San Fernando Hindu Sabha. Also during the early decades of the century, a co-ordinated network is said to have existed among Brahman priests in Trinidad, Suriname, and British Guiana. Especially between the latter two colonies, priests travelled widely to perform rites and it was not unusual for individuals in one colony to have a Brahman *guru* or "godfather" in another. Such ongoing communication between Brahman priests surely did much to consolidate their central position in the socio-religious sphere as well as to standardize forms of practice in the southern Caribbean.

Another highly significant factor in the process of Brahmanization was the arrival of missionaries of the Arya Samaj in the 1910s and 1920s. The Arya Samaj is a North Indian reformist sect founded in 1875 by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. It repudiates the caste system, advocates a monotheistic faith, and emphasizes the prime significance of the Vedas. Soon after its founding, the Arya Samaj gained popularity throughout North India, particularly among lower castes who were attracted to its anti-caste doctrine. The sect had a kind of ripple effect across North India; even those who did not join, after being exposed to Arya Samaji teachings, came to re-evaluate their own beliefs. Freitag (1980:603) writes about the introduction of the Arya Samaj in many towns in Uttar Pradesh where it "polarized Hindus, forcing them to define and identify just what it was that they regarded as their community." There resulted an orthodox backlash in which Brahmans and other high castes sought to codify and organize the tenets and practices of a single Hindu tradition, deemed Sanatan Dharm.

The Arya Samaj was highly conscious of Indian communities in overseas colonies, sending missionaries to call for a return to the Vedas and to assert the glories of an ancient Vedic civilization in the face of foreign cultures (Vedalankar and Somera 1975). Arya Samaj missionaries from India travelled to the Caribbean to preach their protestant message that every individual could effectively be a Brahman on the basis of learning and correct behavior. The reaction of the Hindu orthodox followed parallel lines in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname (Vertovec n.d.1). Great debates over matters of doctrine took place, pitting Arya Samaj leaders against Brahman priests. As in India, the response to the challenge of the Arya Samaj was to consolidate ranks, standardize Brahmanical practice, and organize into Brahman-led national associations. By the 1930s, Arya Samaj had converted a greater percentage of the Hindus in the Caribbean than it ever was able to do in India. Its overall impact, however, was contrary to its goals. The Brahmanization of Caribbean Hinduism, now also known as Sanatan Dharm, was forged even stronger than before.

Largely as a response to the Arya Samaj, the central role of Brahmans was institutionalized in the Caribbean with the rise of national Hindu associations. In 1927, a Pundit's Council was formed in British Guiana to act as sole authority concerning matters of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, a Brahman body acting alongside the Sanatan Dharma Sabha, created to act as national representative body for Hindus. In Suriname in 1929, a body called Sanatan Dharm was founded to function in a similar fashion. And in Trinidad, the dormant Sanatan Dharma Association was revitalized and incorporated in 1932, the same year a rival Brahmanic organization was formed, calling itself the Sanatan Dharma Board of Control. The latter organization gained special prestige in the island by affiliating itself with the Sanatan Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha of Lahore, India, a conservative organization which sent literature and missionaries to the Caribbean. By the end of the 1930s, the Board had branches in 32 towns and villages throughout Trinidad. The unitary and Brahmanic thrust of such Hindu institutionalization in the Caribbean is exemplified by the Board's statement:

The registration of this is regarded by the Hindu community as being an important step in the direction of the unification of Hindu interests...and it is laid down as a definite policy that the Board of Control shall always be predominantly composed of orthodox, practicing pundits (in Forbes 1984:60).

In British Guiana, Smith and Jayawardena (1959:331) describe the emergence of institutionalized, Brahmanic hegemony:

Under the influence of the new stress upon achievement criteria emanating both from the Arya Samaj and from Guianese Society itself, even the "orthodox" Hindu organization, the Santan [sic] Dharm Maha Sabha, was engaged in a reinterpretation of orthodoxy. Whereas the original "coolie culture" had included the idea that low caste groups such as Chamars had their own priests and their own rituals, even they were eventually drawn into the body of "orthodox Hindus" served by the priestly caste of Brahmans.

Elsewhere, Smith (1962:122-123) writes of the emergent, Brahmanized Maha Sabha in British Guiana:

This form of Hinduism has gradually replaced all the lower caste cults and special practices which used to exist among the immigrants, and it claims the affiliation of practically all the temples in the country. ...With its sister organization, the British Guiana Pundits' council, it may be said to control orthodox

Hinduism (or the nearest Guianese equivalent to it), in British Guiana, and has come to constitute a 'church' in the technical sense.

Traditionally, ritual activities of Brahman domestic priests are organized through personal networks of priests and patrons. Such a pattern allows for free competition among priests in a context in which hereditary relations regulate only part of an expanding religious market (van der Veer 1988). In the Caribbean context, the competition prevented the establishment of an effective overarching religious organization. This situation changed considerably with the arrival of Arya Samaj missionaries. The initial success of these missionaries forced the Brahman priests to close their ranks and to come to a formal organization of Sanatan Dharm. In Guyana (Jayawardena 1966:233, 239), Trinidad (Forbes 1984) and Suriname (De Klerk 1953:193 ff.), centralized and Brahman-led organizations came to control the activities of all Sanatani Hindus. Each national organization (Maha Sabha) also came to be major bodies which represented Hindus to non-Indian communities and government authorities. Among their initial successes in each colony's government were the legal recognition of Hindu marriages and the formal allowance of public cremations. With the advent of universal suffrage in the 1940s and the dawning of decolonization throughout the post-war decades, organized Hinduism in the Caribbean entered the realm of party politics.

RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND POLITICS

As colonial authorities gradually handed over legislative power to local politicians, issues of race and ethnicity increasingly came to the fore in Trinidad, Suriname, and Guyana. In each context, the societies were polarized into Creole and Indian segments (with Javanese comprising an important third force in Suriname). The Indians themselves represented a significant proportion of the vote, yet their political effectiveness was undermined by their division into Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities (Tinker 1977). Hindus accounted for the majority of Indians in each case and, not surprisingly, their Brahman-led, centralized organizations (Maha Sabhas) became the prominent agents engaged in the political tasks of promoting communal interests. By stressing on a national public agenda matters considered important for Hindus within the evolving system of politics in their respective plural societies, the Brahman leaders in each context played a major role in forging modern Hindu ethnic identity. This was accomplished through formulating an ideology and promulgating symbols that functioned to erect or bolster locally relevant ethnic boundaries. In each place this process was complex and the following serves merely to indicate a few exemplary developments in each of the three main territories.

In Trinidad, the ethnic-religious nature of Indian politics was perhaps strongest. There, the People's Democratic Party (PDP, later to become the Democratic Labor Party, DLP) virtually co-functioned with the island's Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha. Ryan (1972:141) points out,

The PDP in fact had never really functioned as an autonomous political party with a constitution and a grass-roots organization. It felt no real need to organize since the branches of the Maha Sabha and the priesthood were easily convertible into political instrumentalities. Apart from the role which the Hindu priesthood played in keeping the flock together, it has always been the source to which politicians turned for help in their political careers. Pundits were among the principal opinion leaders within the Hindu community, and a few of them used this advantage to seek political office.

There is considerable evidence to support the charge that many religious meetings in temples and in homes ultimately became political meetings, and that Hindus were enjoined to support their religion by ensuring that Hindus were elected to public bodies. Pundits were known to make individuals swear on the *lotah* (a holy Hindu vessel) to support candidates, and would threaten religious sanctions for broken pledges.

The leader of the creole-based People's National Movement (PNM), and eventual Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams, used the Brahman control over the PDP/DLP to his own advantage: he directly pointed to this control and managed to win many Muslim and Christian Indians to his side (Vasil 1984:309-312).

In Suriname, the Brahman leaders of Sanatan Dharm have played a prominent role throughout the many fluctuations and coalitions of party politics since the 1940s (Dew 1978). In 1947 they established their own Surinaamse Hindoe Partij (SHP) prior to the introduction of universal suffrage. Since there was no system of proportional representation, they saw it fit to merge with other Indian parties (one Muslim and one Broad-based) in 1949 to form the Verenigde Hindostaanse Partij (VHP, United Hindustani Party). Deep divisions ensued among Hindus and Muslims, however, and the party soon split, then renamed the Verenigde Hindoe Partij. The VHP played a major part in successive elections and in national coalition governments. In the early 1970s, to counteract charges of Hindu racialism, the party changed its name to Vooruitstrevende Hervormings Partij (Progressive Reform Party) and took other steps to show a more even ethnic makeup. Its popular backing is still greatly Hindu, while Muslims have their own Vooruitstrevende Moslims Partij.

Finally, in Guyana the Hindu elite have played a rather contradictory role. Jagan's People's Progressive Party (PPP) was meant to be multi-ethnic, with a Marxist ideology over-riding communalist sentiments; nonetheless, it gained its backing essentially from rural Indians. Hindu and Muslim backgrounds of candidates used to their advantage in party-appointed constituencies. Since the 1950s, Sanatan Dharm Maha Sabha leaders have simultaneously been PPP members of parliament along with Muslim leaders of the United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman. But by the early 1970s, the ruling, creole-dominated People's National Congress (PNC) was able to attract important Hindus, who through their special positions controversially affected the entire Hindu community. Vasil (1984:302-303) explains,

Three of the pre-eminent ones among them were Shesh Narain, S. S. Narain and Cammie Ram Saroop, given in the early 70's respectively the positions of Speaker of the Assembly, Minister of Housing, and Minister without Portfolio and Chairman of the PNC. Through them the PNC was able to establish considerable influence over one of the key Hindu organizations, the Hindu Mahasabha. Shesh Narain was the President of the Mahasabha and S. S. Narain, the Treasurer. One of the important leaders of the PPP, Reepu Daman Persaud, who had considerable influence over the Mahasabha, was thrown out of the organization through manipulation by Shesh Narain and S. S. Narain. The PNC was also able to establish considerable influence over the Pandits' Council by giving the organization government recognition and making it part of the administration. ...Pandits were given official registration and marriages performed by them were granted legal acceptance. They were allowed to charge official rates for the performance of the rituals. These being the main source of livelihood for many of them, naturally they came under the control of the PNC government as it alone gave them registration. Through these Pandits, who enjoy considerable prestige among the Hindus, the PNC was able to establish some influence and support within the Hindu community.

Thus, the Brahmanization of Hinduism in Guyana took a curious turn when the Sanatanist organization came to support the traditionally creole party by way of favors to the Brahman elite.

Indians overseas seldom achieve political unity; instead, "cultural differences within the population become symbols for competing segments" (Kuper 1969:266) and candidates explicitly seek support from specific communal groups within the Indian populace. The Brahman elite, especially through their control of Hindu institutions, has played a significant part in the political mobilization of Indians abroad, as well as in the refinement and routinization of doctrinal matters and ritual forms. Yet since the introduction of Indians to the Caribbean, Brahmans have been instrumental in the ethnicization of Hinduism through which, in each context, public symbols and practices of Hindus have been forged, advocated, and managed.

CONCLUSION

Hindu beliefs and practices have developed along remarkably similar lines in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, where Hindu communities have arisen as the result of an ethnicization of Hinduism. We have drawn attention to several aspects of this process. First, we noted the gradual decreasing importance of notions of social origin, in particular caste. These notions lost their relevance in the colonial system of indentured labor. A unified Hindu community was constructed by homogenizing a great variety of social and religious practices. Second, Brahmans escaped the unification of the Hindu community to the extent that they came to form a closed, elite group of leaders and priests. However, their internal differences lost social relevance, so that as an elite they became unified. An important role in the unification of the Brahman elite was played by the Arya Samaj. The reformist attacks on Brahmanical religion had the unintended consequence of strengthening the organization of "orthodox religion," Sanatan Dharm. In the post-colonial period religious organizations dominated by Brahmans heavily influenced the grass-roots political support of Hindu ethnic leaders.

The leading position of Brahmans in the Caribbean has not gone unchallenged. As we have seen, the Arya Samaj launched an important attack on the privileged position of Brahmans. Nowadays, especially among well-educated young Hindus in the Caribbean, the Brahmanic monopoly on religious knowledge and ritual privilege is again under dispute (Vertovec 1990). Nonetheless, the trend towards ethnicized Hinduism, the culmination of processes of Brahmanic standardization and institutionalization, is even developing. The fact of ethnic and religious pluralism, compounded by rapid social, economic, and political change, has made Caribbean Hindus increasingly self-aware of their practices and image (Jayawardena 1980). Symbols of Hinduism in the Caribbean, and similarly in other parts of the world like Britain (Burghart 1987), are regarded by both Hindus and non-Hindus as visible markers of group identity and collective purpose. Hinduism therefore retains political import in these ethnically divided social and political arenas.

The ethnicization of Hinduism in the Caribbean seems to show us a possibility which is gradually also realized on the subcontinent. In India we can see the development of a syndicated majority religion which has pervasive implications for Indian politics (Frykenberg 1989). Among other things this calls for comparison

with the development of Hinduism in other places. A striking difference between the Indian and the Caribbean cases seems to be that in India it is much more the monastic organizations which seem to form the backbone of a Hindu nationalism that equates the Indian nation with the Hindu community. Such organizations cannot be found in the Caribbean, where Brahman priests could easily dominate religious discourse. A more thorough comparison between the development of Indian and Caribbean Hinduisms is beyond the scope of this essay. It is quite clear, however, that it will no longer do to confine the study of Hinduism to the subcontinent. Not only would comparative study be essential for the understanding of such phenomena as ethnicization, but also the phenomena themselves have become transnational. There is a constant flow of persons, goods, and information between India and the rest of the world which now makes Hinduism transnational. The anthropology of Hinduism, therefore, can no longer be exclusively tied to the anthropology of India.

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